

Evaluation of the Decriminalization of Illegal Drugs in British Columbia

Findings from Year 1

On January 31st, 2023, the province of British Columbia (BC) decriminalized the personal possession of up to 2.5 g of opioids, cocaine, methamphetamine, and MDMA among adults (18+) for a period of three years. This decriminalization initiative aims to reduce stigma, criminalization, and associated harms for people who use drugs (PWUD), while improving access to health services, trust in law enforcement, and public awareness of drug use as a health issue.

The *Ontario Node of the Canadian Research Initiative in Substance Matters (OCRINT)* is conducting a five-year independent evaluation of the decriminalization policy to assess its impact across the following domains:



People Who Use Drugs (PWUD)



Police & Criminal Justice System



General Public



Health Service System



Economic Impacts

Public Opinion Poll

Overview


- Public sentiment plays a large role in the outcome of drug policies such as decriminalization.
- It is important to assess the extent to which decriminalization is achieving its intended goals, particularly in regards to shifting public discourse toward a health-based approach.
- Understanding public attitudes can help policymakers identify gaps in awareness, and provide insights into the broader social and political climate surrounding decriminalization.
- In collaboration with *IPSOS*, a public opinion polling firm, OCRINT is conducting yearly cross-sectional surveys among a representative sample of approximately **n=1,500** English-speaking adults (18+) residing in BC.
- This sub-study aims to evaluate and characterize the BC public's awareness, understanding, perceptions, and attitudes towards decriminalization, as well as how views may evolve over the course of its implementation.

Methods


- The first survey was distributed between March 26 - April 1, 2024. Results are presented below.
- One survey item assessed support of decriminalization, and ten items assessed attitudes toward decriminalization.
- Responses were weighted to reflect the BC population based on census data for region, age, gender, and education.

Results


Sample Characteristics (n=1,202)



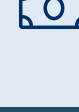
51% Female or other




35% 18 - 39 years of age




53% Living with a partner or married




29% Income of \$60,000 - \$99,000




31% High school or less



78% No children

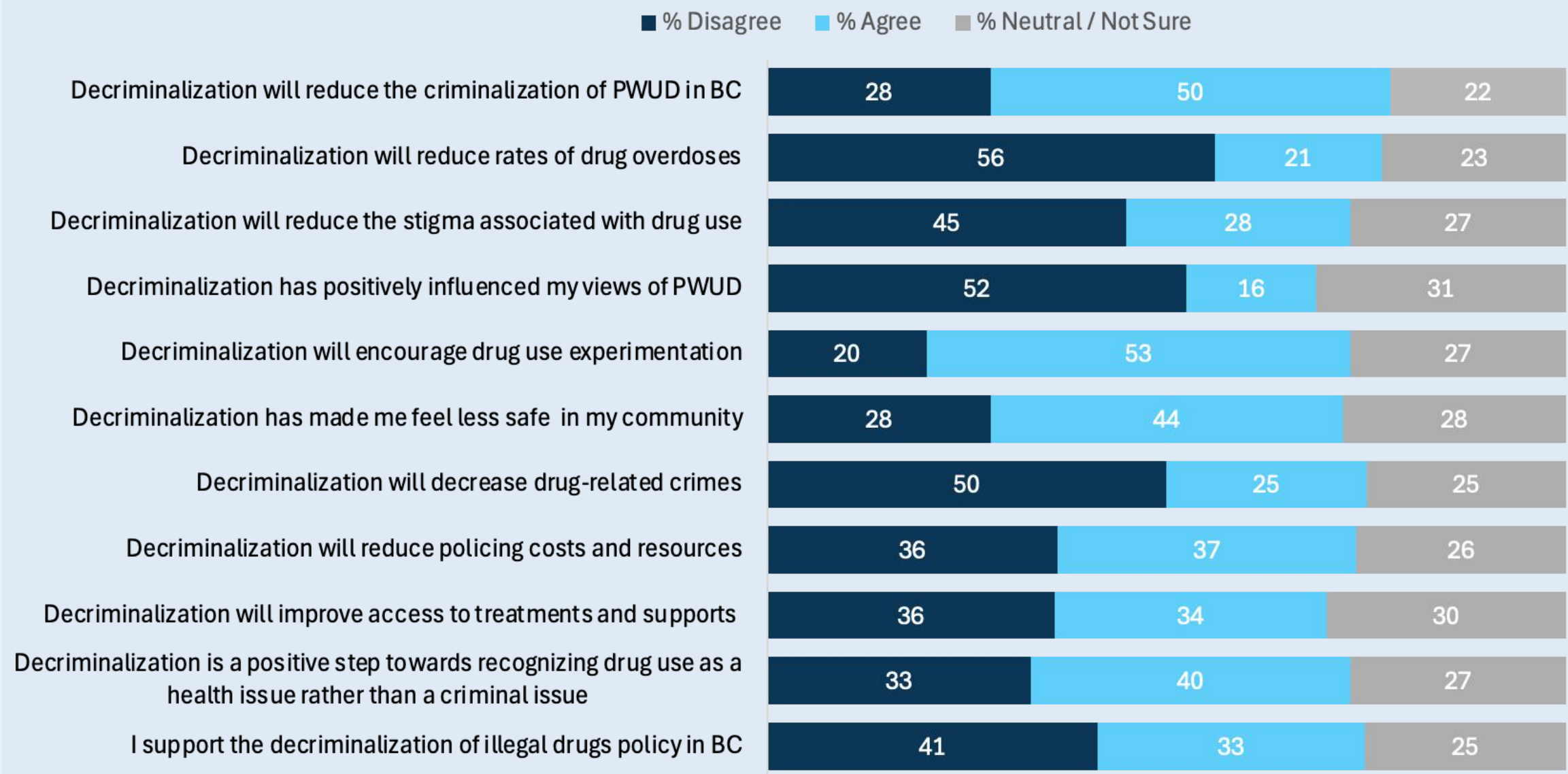


54% Employed



40% Living in Fraser Health Authority Region

Attitudes Toward Decriminalization (n=1,202)



Perceived Benefits of Decriminalization

- Less strain on police/court/prison resources
- More support for PWUD
- Fewer criminal records
- Less stigma
- Potential reduction in crime

Perceived Concerns of Decriminalization

- Increase in addiction/PWUD
- Easier access/exposure to drugs among youth
- Normalization of drug use
- Public visibility of drug use
- Policy does not address the root cause of the problem

Implications & Next Steps

- More people appear to oppose the decriminalization policy rather than support it.
- Most participants were split on whether they believe the policy will reach its intended goals (e.g., reducing policing costs, improving treatment, changing negative perceptions of PWUD).
- Open drug use in public spaces was listed as a concern, and 43% of participants indicated the policy has made them feel less safe in their community.
- Results will be used as a baseline to monitor key outcomes and perceptions of the policy going forward.
- The next survey was launched in February 2025.

Source: Imtiaz, S., Russell, C., Ali, F., Elton-Marshall, T., Patenaude, S., Rehm, J., Public Support Of And Attitudes Toward Decriminalization Of Possession Of Illegal Drugs Among The General Population In British Columbia. *Journal Of Drug And Alcohol Dependence*. Under Review.